

History/Popular Culture: A Review of *Frost/Nixon*, the Book and the Movie

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David Frost [with Robert Zelnick]. *Frost/Nixon: Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interview*. [New York:] HarperCollins, 2007. ISBN 978-0-06-144586-6.

Frost/Nixon. Peter Morgan, screenwriter. Ron Howard, director. Universal Studios, 2008. 122 min.

The life of Richard Nixon continues to inspire historical debate, cultural reflection, and public caricature, long after his resignation from the presidency of the United States in August 1974. Fifteen years after his death, the release of more tapes and documents from the Nixon White House and of *Frost/Nixon* are but the latest instalments in the on-going assessment of his presidency and his life.¹

Frost/Nixon is a movie based on the play of the same name by Peter Morgan, and purports to tell the story of the famous interviews of Nixon conducted in 1977 by British television personality David Frost. Morgan's script was inspired by *The Conviction of Richard Nixon: The Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews*, written by James Reston, one of Frost's researchers, as well as by Frost's 1977 account, *I Gave Them a Sword*.² Capitalizing on the popularity of the movie, Frost has released a sequel, *Frost/Nixon: Behind the Scenes of the Nixon Interview*. This book includes five portions of interview transcripts with Nixon discussing Watergate, the Huston Plan, Salvador Allende, the Vietnam War, and Henry Kissinger.³

Frost/Nixon the movie is remarkable in its ability to turn what is really nothing more than two talking heads into a gripping film. *Frost/Nixon* the book is more disappointing. Frost's publisher claims the book, an account of the path to the 1977 broadcasts, is "nothing short of hilarious," that its insights are

¹ Charlie Savage, "On Nixon Tapes, Ambivalence Over Abortion, Not Watergate," *New York Times* (23 June 2009), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/24/us/politics/24nixon.html?bl&ex=1245988800&en=948520d3f4de6dd5&ei=5087>.

² *Frost/Nixon* was Morgan's first play. Since then, Morgan has written the screenplays for the movies *The Deal* (about Gordon Brown and Tony Blair), *The Queen* (Queen Elizabeth in the aftermath of Princess Diana's death), and *The Last King of Scotland* (Idi Amin).

³ The movie has also prompted re-release of the original interviews on DVD. The website for the movie *Frost/Nixon* is <http://www.frostnixon.net/>; that for the original interviews by David Frost is <http://frostnixon.com>. Nixon has become such a cultural icon that the latter website offers free cell phone ringtones of Nixon saying such phrases as "I am not a crook" and "When a president does it, that means it is not illegal."

“fascinating,” and the story is “absorbing.” Only rarely does the book merit these claims, as Frost’s writing is often plodding and repetitive.⁴ Secondary sources are poorly integrated and not footnoted.⁵ The absence of an index further limits the utility of the book.

In part, Frost’s account is an attempt to correct the inaccuracies resulting from Morgan’s dramatic license in presenting the story in both the play and the movie. Frost notes, “There were more fictionalizations than I would have preferred, although one such piece of fictionalization – Nixon’s phone call to me on the eve of [the] Watergate [interview] – was, I thought, a masterpiece.... Whenever I made these points [about historical accuracy] to Peter [Morgan], he would simply sigh and say, ‘David, you’ve got to remember this is a play, not a documentary’” (4-5). While the differences between Frost’s recollection of events and Morgan’s dramatic presentation of them are mentioned, Frost does not seriously delve into the relationships among truth, history, memory, and popular culture. Frost asserts that “[t]he goal of any good interviewer is truth” (139), but the nature of truth and its connections to oral history, journalism, politics, and television remain largely unexplored.

The evasion of deeper discussion of these subjects is the greatest disappointment of the book. Missed opportunities abound. Frost recalls producer John Birt giving him a note before the famous Watergate interview, which read in part: “It is not a conventional interview: you are exchanging interpretations of the known facts...” (100). Frost refers to the work of “the audio men, technical directors, crews, makeup artists, and all others involved in the production” as “the raw material of history” (102). At another point, he declares that the interviews, coupled with Nixon’s memoirs, “would stand as the history of his presidency” (135). Such remarks leave the reader with numerous questions. What, from Frost’s perspective, is a ‘conventional’ interview? How did the production crew shape the presentation of the interviews and how did their editing alter reception and interpretation of the finished product, that is, the broadcasts themselves? What other sources should be used in creating the history of a public figure, and how does their creation and interpretation differ from that of memoirs and interviews? As a veteran telejournalist, Frost must have opinions about these questions, but he chooses not to share them.

⁴ The final transcript does end on a humorous note, as Nixon comments on a news report of Kissinger being caught on tape insulting Nixon at a banquet in Ottawa: “The only problem was that he didn’t think to turn the microphone off. On the other hand, I didn’t turn it off either in the Oval Office on occasions, so I never held him for that” (368).

⁵ An exception to the poor use of secondary sources is Frost’s countering of Nixon’s interpretation of Watergate as presented in Nixon’s 1990 book, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat and Renewal*. Frost takes eight pages to cite and systematically debunk Nixon’s claims (168-175).

The negotiations that took place to arrange the interviews are described in detail. Frost itemizes his conditions, an interesting mix of those required to ensure journalistic respectability (complete editorial control and the freedom to discuss Watergate) and those necessary for financial profitability (exclusivity and significantly more interview hours than would be broadcast ultimately). The tension between these two requirements are not fully addressed. Frost acknowledges the need “to develop material interesting enough to get viewers to tune in to all four of our planned programs” (68). But little discussion ensues regarding the ways in which these two competing goals may have influenced the interviews themselves.

Frost occasionally provides insight into his decisions regarding the order and phrasing of interview questions, but his attempts to analyze Nixon’s responses are limited. Frequently he tries to convey the visual component of the interviews, but the result is, at times, theatrical (“...Nixon’s face became a mask of pain. He paused. He drew a breath. His lips tightened. And then he spoke” (57).) Camera angles, close-ups, and editing techniques are never discussed.⁶ When Frost does choose to break away from mere description and venture into analysis or philosophical reflection, the results are, on occasion, awkwardly pedantic. He recalls a conversation with John Birt on Nixon’s alleged policy of divide and rule:

[Birt commented,] “It was as fundamental a characteristic of Nixon’s leadership style as anything one can mention.” “But what is the alternative?” I argued. “Surrender to the will of a dedicated minority?” “In a democracy, that may very well be the alternative,” said Birt. “At its best, democracy is a constantly shifting process of accommodation to majority and minority sentiment. The convictions of a minority may often be permitted to prevail if they are held with greater passion than those of the majority. In a free society, intensity of feeling is often as important as the mere numbers that would be reflected through the taking of a plebiscite.” “I see your argument,” I said. “But I don’t feel it. I don’t think it’s a strong case or a particularly desirable inevitability” (85).

⁶ Frost ignores the role of camera operators and video editors in creating an interpretation of Nixon’s life as staged as the play and the movie themselves. And yet members of Frost’s research team were well aware of this role. Researcher James Reston, Jr., for example, recalled the interviews as “extraordinary television. It is the immense power of the close-up.” Adam McDowell, “The informer informs about *Frost/Nixon*,” *The National Post* (17 October 2008), <http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/story.html?id=888537>.

The purpose of including such a passage is unclear; Frost does nothing further with this stilted conversation. Nor is it clear how this ‘discussion’ relates to either the Nixon presidency or the interviews.

The movie claims that the interviews were as much (or more) about the revitalization of careers and redemption of reputations as they were about creation of an historical record. Morgan’s screenplay asserts that Nixon sought to reclaim public status after his resignation to avoid impeachment, while Frost is presented as a social climber striving to recover from career set-backs. Frost’s research and production team are depicted as political zealots out to give Nixon the public trial he avoided, which brings them into frequent conflict with Frost. In Frost’s book, however, the moral divide between him and his researchers is less sharply defined. Frost comments that his relationship with Nixon “was at times symbiotic and at times adversarial. But always there was in my mind the notion that a product done with integrity would benefit everybody” (151). Interview editor Bob Zelnick is quoted as describing the team (including Frost) as viewing themselves as “senior litigation partners in a law firm” (134), a view which Frost does not dispute. Frost even refers to himself as Nixon’s “inquisitor” at one point (135). James Reston, however, sides with Morgan’s presentation of group dynamics over Frost’s: “The tensions grew when I saw that he [Frost] just wasn’t paying attention to what I regarded as a historic enterprise.”⁷

The inclusion of the selections from the interview transcripts in the final pages of the book is a mixed blessing. There is much repetition, unfortunately. Since the bulk of the manuscript is a blow-by-blow description (with insufficient analysis) of the content of the interviews themselves, often incorporating direct quotations from the transcripts, the transcripts offer little that is different. What the transcripts do provide, however, is the flavour of the interviews themselves, something curiously lacking from Frost’s detailed account.⁸ Discussing his working relationship with Henry Kissinger, Nixon recalled that, in light of the Kent State shootings, Kissinger had doubts about the wisdom of conducting military operations in Cambodia:

And I said, ‘Henry,’... I said, ‘We’ve done it.’ I said, “Remember Lot’s wife. Never look back.’ I don’t know whether Henry had read the Old Testament or not. But I had, and he got the point.... Whenever he would come in and say, ‘Well, I’m not sure we should have done this or that or the other thing,’ I would say, ‘Henry, remember Lot’s wife.’ And that would end the conversation’ (359).

⁷ Adam McDowell, “The informer informs about *Frost/Nixon*,” *The National Post* (17 October 2008), <http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/story.html?id=888537>.

⁸ The inclusion of Nixon’s trademark hesitations of speech (“ah, ah”) is annoying, however.

Frost describes this same segment of the interview transcript earlier in his book, using almost identical words (73). Whether much is gained from presenting such information twice is debatable. Frost uses such material to speculate on the psychological differences between the two personalities, but the political and historical implications receive less attention.

One of the most famous portions of the 1977 interviews is Nixon's public 'apology.' This scene is the tension-filled climax of the movie *Frost/Nixon*: the former president is compelled to offer a *mea culpa* in response to Frost's open and inviting posture and the weight of evidence courtesy of some hasty archival research by James Reston. This depiction has come under criticism by Reston, and receives lengthy treatment in Frost's book.⁹ The research was not the thrilling last-minute discovery depicted in the film, both men explain.¹⁰ But neither Frost nor Reston challenges the notion that what Nixon offered in the Watergate interview was an actual apology. Frost's comments on this portion of the interview equate his interview technique with a sports victory: "As I read the quotes, Nixon's face became drawn and strained; each quote somehow seemed to have the impact of a blow on the ropes of a virtual boxing ring. Those who today observe the tape suggest that at this moment Nixon knew he was a beaten man. Clearly something had struck home" (226). And the interchange itself, beginning with Frost's dramatic tossing aside of his clipboard and ending with Nixon's declaration that he "let down the country," is deliberately condensed in the movie: this telescoping of time increases the sense of defeat. The words of the transcript itself suggest much less defeatism on the part of Nixon. Far from apologizing, Nixon states the obvious ("I made so many bad judgments") but hastens into explanation and justification. He insists that his were "mistakes of the heart, rather than the head" (250). Frost takes this limited concession as a personal victory: "Nixon had traveled a long and circuitous route from denial and defiance to acceptance and admission" (250). Frost makes some interesting choices in the transcription of this portion of the interview, where Nixon declares:

Well, when I said, 'I just hope I haven't let you down,' that said it all.
I had.
I let down my friends.
I let down the country.

⁹ Adam McDowell, "The informer informs about *Frost/Nixon*," *The National Post* (17 October 2008), <http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/story.html?id=888537>.

¹⁰ By contrast, Nixon's famous declaration "When the president does it... that means that it is not illegal" in the interview transcript discussing the Huston Plan (266) has all the shocking force of the corresponding scene from the movie.

I let down our system of government and the dreams of all those young people that ought to get into government but think it's all too corrupt and the rest.

While Nixon observes that he disappointed people through his actions, he does not, in fact, apologize for them. The repetitive rhythm of the words "I let down" are heightened by Frost's decision to transcribe each sentence as a separate paragraph. The result is a passage that is reminiscent of a liturgical response or scriptural lament. Frost thus manages to set a tone of confession, achieving the apologetic stance that Nixon's words alone do not convey. In doing so, Frost not only strives to reinforce the historical import of his series of interviews, but assists in the rehabilitation of Nixon's reputation.

Frost's book concludes with an assessment of the Nixon presidency. He credits Nixon with creating swing-voting Democrats, signing the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and normalizing relations with China. Initial modest successes that almost instantly faded include achieving détente with the Soviet Union and ending the war in Vietnam. Frost ultimately decides that Watergate was symbolic of Nixon's approach to politics. "This was a man whose dark side conquered the whole. This was not a man with competing tendencies that could not coexist. He is not a man who threatened democratic society in the manner of, say Augusto Pinochet or Hugo Chávez; rather, he threatened it with corrosion from within, with a lack of structural integrity, with destruction of the value system upon which it is grounded. The pardon by Gerald Ford seemed a relatively small and somewhat technical act. Nixon's real pardon would have to come from a higher source" (201).

Book and movie alike end on melodramatic notes that seek to recover the humanity of Nixon. *Frost/Nixon* the movie ends with Frost presenting a pair of Italian loafers to a sad and lonely Nixon. *Frost/Nixon* the book ends with an odd present-tense first-person-plural account of Frost's last meeting with Nixon (204-205):

But we have trespassed upon his solitude for long enough. It is time to go. We leave him standing by the window, gazing toward the ocean. He has made us feel at home. This man normally so ill at ease with people. Perhaps even more ill at ease with himself. A good mind, with a thirst for nobility. A sad man, who so wanted to be great.

As we drive away, I look back and I wish him peace at the center.

It is a passage whose tone is incongruent with the rest of the book, but which endeavours (as does the movie) to cultivate a degree of pity and sympathy for Richard Nixon.

The film has been seen by some as an allegory for more recent U.S. politics. Responding to the question “Is George W. Bush today’s Nixon?” James Reston told the *National Post*, “That’s the metaphor, isn’t it? That’s the magic of the play, particularly with the line, ‘If the president does it, it’s not illegal.’ In New York, that line was met with wild, derisive laughter – it’s all about Bush, not about Nixon.”¹¹ Morgan acknowledges that in some ways *Frost/Nixon* is more about Bush than Nixon, telling the *New York Times* that while in office, Bush was “busy exonerating Richard Nixon every single day” and that key themes of the play were “putting a president in the dock and the idea of public accountability.”¹² Even Frost occasionally ventures beyond the subject of the Nixon interviews to comment critically on subsequent presidencies and policies. He mentions the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, the suspension of *habeas corpus*, violations of the Geneva Convention, and indefinite incarceration of those suspected of terrorism. Without overtly condemning George Bush, he notes, “It would seem that in certain respects, Nixon may well have had to confront a double standard” (93).

Playwright and screenwriter Peter Morgan observes, “Truth is an illusory notion. For *Frost/Nixon*, everyone I spoke to told the story their way. Even people in the room tell different versions. There’s no one truth about what happened in those interviews, so I feel very relaxed about bringing my imagination to the piece. God knows everyone else has.”¹³ *Frost/Nixon* the movie is a remarkable achievement, transforming hours of staid interviews into surprisingly gripping entertainment. *Frost/Nixon* the book makes portions of the interview transcripts accessible to a general public that might not otherwise have an interest in the material. Both would be useful resources in a high school or first year university American history course, provided they are used in a critical manner. Both have

¹¹ Adam McDowell, “The informer informs about *Frost/Nixon*,” *The National Post* (17 October 2008), <http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/story.html?id=888537>. See also Gareth McLean, “When the playboy met the liar,” *The Guardian* (1 August 2006), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/aug/01/theatre2> for a review of the play. Nixon’s pursuit of the war in Vietnam and accompanying suppression of civil liberties in the United States, some argue, was paralleled by George W. Bush and the war in Iraq. David Greenberg, “In Nixon’s Tricks, Rove’s Roots and a Blueprint for Bush,” *New York Times* (1 May 2007), <http://campaigningforhistory.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/05/01/in-nixons-tricks-roves-roots-and-a-blueprint-for-bush/?scp=47&sq=frost/nixon&st=cse>.

¹² Caryn James, “The Sound of Personalities Clashing,” *New York Times* (28 October 2007), http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/movies/28jame.html?_r=1&scp=41&sq=frost/nixon&st=cse.

¹³ Gareth McLean, “When the playboy met the liar,” *The Guardian* (1 August 2006), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/aug/01/theatre2>.

the potential to raise important questions in the minds of their readers and viewers. In the multiplicity of illusory truths, how do we make sense of competing historical interpretations? How does literary imagination inform historical understandings? How do audio-visual media differ from text in creating a sense of the past? Whether viewing movies and reading their spin-off books are the best ways of engaging these questions is debatable; for many students, however, they may be the most accessible and most enjoyable.